Deutsche Grammophon
JÓHANN JÓHANNSSON
PIANO WORKS
A L I C E S A R A O T T

1. Bað
2. Odi et Amo/Krókódíll
3. Englabörn
4. Jói & Karen
5. Flugeldar II from “Dís”
6. Já, Hemmi Minn from “Dís”
7. Ruslpóstur from “Dís”
8. The Sun’s Gone Dim and the Sky’s Turned Black
9. Melodia (III)
10. Theme from “Varmints”
11. Dressing Up from “Personal Effects”
12. Linda & Walter from “Personal Effects”
13. Indian Wedding from “Personal Effects”
14. He Says It’s the Future from “Copenhagen Dreams”
15. Eleven Thousand Six Hundred and Sixty-Nine Died of Natural Causes from “Copenhagen Dreams”
16. Flight from the City
17. Innocence from “Free the Mind”
18. Will’s Story I from “Free the Mind”
19. Time to Say Goodbye from “White Black Boy”
20. Payphone from “McCanick”
21. A Game of Croquet from “The Theory of Everything”
22. A Model of the Universe from “The Theory of Everything“
23. The Theory of Everything from “The Theory of Everything”
24. Beauty from “Blind Massage”
25. A Sparrow Alighted Upon Our Shoulder
26. By the Roes, and by the Hinds of the Field
27. Good Morning, Midnight
28. The Drowned World
29. The Radiant City
30. Be Over from “The Shadow Play”

APPROACHED with the concept of recording an album drawing exclusively upon Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson's most outstanding pieces, arranged for piano, from across his career, Alice Sara Ott was initially wary, if not for the most obvious reasons. "I absolutely loved his music," the German-Japanese pianist explains, "but I had never met him in person." In fact, she decided, this ruled her out, so it's fortunate she went on to reconsider. "I thought about how deeply his music touches so many people who also never met him."

Jóhannsson had passed away in 2018, leaving a gaping hole in the cultural arena but an extensive and masterful catalogue. For more than two decades, his inspired and innovative albums, like 2006's moving breakthrough, *IBM 1401, A User's Manual*, and the stately yet sometimes terrifying *Drone Mass*, released posthumously in 2022, had helped dissolve the borders between the electronic and the orchestral. He'd also kept himself increasingly busy scoring for the screen, with early undertakings including 2004's *Dís*, an Icelandic comedy, and 2011's *The Miners' Hymns*, an elegiac documentary by Bill Morrisson for which he'd added pipe organ to his armoury.

Indeed, his scores had rapidly earned him a formidable reputation, not least his collaborations with Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve, among them 2013's *Prisoners* and 2016's *Arrival*. Honours he secured included a Golden Globe for 2015's *The Theory of Everything*, James Marsh's acclaimed account of Stephen Hawkings' life with his wife, Jane, as well as two Oscar nominations, one for the same film and another for Villeneuve's *Sicario* the same year. Consequently, his loss, aged 48, provoked tributes across the board, from fellow film scorer Clint Mansell and pianist and composer Ludovico Einaudi to experimental electronic producer Flying Lotus and pop stars Pet Shop Boys.

The latter even disclosed that they'd been planning an alliance, and it's indicative of Jóhannsson's nature that, right to the end, he remained habitually inventive. For Panos Cosmatos's *Mandy*, a surreal horror feature whose score would be the last he'd complete and release, he even turned to the "minimal maximalism" of Sunn O))). With Stephen O'Malley on guitars and Randall Dunn as producer, this was a gripping, ferocious combination of what *Pitchfork* summarized as "black metal, menacing ambient, doom drone, and piercing orchestrations."

If that seemed outlandish, it made sense to Jóhannsson, who rarely respected conventions. "I honestly don't see any difference," he'd told me two years earlier, looking back at his youth, "between what I was doing in my garage with my 8-track and my guitars and my fuzz pedals and amplifiers, and what I'm doing today. I'm just using different means and more resources."

Thus, even as Hollywood's demands on him grew, Jóhannsson maintained his identity and reputation as an artist in his own right, and a deal with Deutsche Grammophon led to 2016's *Orphée*, which sadly turned out to be the last studio album released during his lifetime. This had been the product of seven years' work, but was nonetheless almost immediately followed by his stunning score for Villeneuve's *Arrival*. Unfortunately, despite his unconventional use of the human voice perfectly reflecting the director's themes of language and communication, this was controversially deprived of an Oscar nomination after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ruled it had been "diluted" by the use of pre-existing music in its opening and closing scenes.

This was, of course, ridiculous. As the director said later, Jóhannsson had helped him "to make contact with a civilization from outer space." Nothing, in other words, could diminish this score, and his compositions elsewhere remain towering achievements whose stature has only grown. But the closer one listens, the better one understands that their scale represents just a single element in their enduring fascination. So, while it's hard to imagine "diluting" his work, its often-doleful grandeur can nonetheless be distilled.

This was something that, despite her caution, Ott appreciated instinctively when she learned that Faber Music had published sheet music for thirty of his most revered pieces. "What's so

incredible about Jóhann Jóhannsson's music," she says, "is how his compositions, originally written for larger ensembles and different instruments, translate so beautifully to the piano. Within this more focused and intimate sound world, the music reveals hidden nuances and enhances the purity and clarity that are so intrinsic to his music."

If Ott was unable to compare notes with Jóhannsson, she could at least meet those who'd once known him. In addition, the more stories his friends shared, as well as insight into his processes, the more she found herself absorbed by the challenge she'd accepted. "As I worked on these pieces – internalizing the musical architecture, shapes, and language of Jóhann's music – it actually felt like a very personal dialogue with him. And that's the beauty of music: it unites even strangers on an emotional and spiritual level, without setting any boundaries."

It helped that Ott had already enjoyed an earlier encounter with Jóhannsson's homeland. "Iceland is a very special place for me," she elaborates. "I came here ten years ago for a project with my dear friend Ólafur Arnalds, which we later called *The Chopin Project*, at a time when I was in the middle of an artistic crisis. Coming back to Iceland after a decade and being surrounded again by this rough, monumental vastness of nature brought back so many memories."

This time, Ott teamed up with Grammy-nominated producer and engineer Bergur Þórisson, half of the band Hugar, as well as, in recent years, Björk's musical director. He'd helped record *The Chopin Project* and also, on occasions, worked with Jóhannsson himself, so the alliance proved a natural creative fit. "We decided to record most of the pieces on an old upright piano that Bergur has in his studio," she continues. "I was absolutely in love with it. It was one of the most beautiful upright pianos I've ever played on. The felted sound creates this sense of nostalgia, like memories of something that's gone."

This suited Jóhannsson's aesthetic, which is frequently awash with the bittersweet joys of hindsight. For confirmation one need only hear *IBM 1401*, inspired by his father's turn-of-the-1970s

recordings of the titular computer, or 2019's *12 Conversations with Thilo Heinzmann*, shaped as much by the composer's discussions with the Berlin-based painter as by the professor's art. Indeed, Ott and Þórisson took care to ensure their technical and intellectual approach acknowledged Jóhannsson's intentions.

"The microphones were placed very close to the piano," she adds, "so the sound feels incredibly present and intimate, almost as if you're looking directly into his inner world." Quite how intimate this is can be observed in the occasional, gentle creaks of her instrument captured, for example, amid the unfurling charms of "Já, Hemmi Minn" (originally from *Dís*) and the compassionate sincerity which permeates "A Game of Croquet" (from *The Theory of Everything*).

That Ott prevails in extracting the essence of these compositions – which also offer work from 2008's *Fordlandia* as well as further films, among them 2009's *Personal Effects* and 2012's *Copenhagen Dreams* – can perhaps be attributed to her immersion in a world with which Jóhannsson had once been familiar himself. For five days, she strolled each morning to Þórisson's waterside studio, accompanied by a brisk wind and the calls of raucous seagulls, before settling into his cosy den to spend hours polishing her interpretations. "This combination," she says, "of Iceland's nature and recording his piano music brought me to a place of decompression and calm."

All the same, this refined yet affecting collection speaks to the substance of the pieces themselves, with their raw, sensitive but deceptive simplicity laid bare by Ott's performances. That these lack, for instance, the treated falsetto running through "Odi et Amo" (from 2002's debut LP, *Englabörn*), or the rueful computerised voice so key to "The Sun's Gone Dim and the Sky's Turned Black" (from *IBM 1401*), or the lamenting strings which nevertheless elevate "Flight from the City" (from *Orphée*) – none of this matters one bit. Ott allows the first to breathe, the second to tremble, and the last to transform its central melody at an appropriately unhurried pace.

"I relish challenges," Jóhannsson told me in 2016, "and I try to use each project to learn something new and try something I haven't done before. I try not to repeat myself." One imagines, therefore, he'd have relished Ott treating his solo and cinematic ventures with equal gravity, pinpointing the singular details that make them so compelling. In casting fresh light on his compositions, however, she also underlines the esteem in which she holds both composer and work, not to mention the responsibility, and indeed privilege, she recognized in the chance to present Jóhannsson's music in such a stark and candid setting.

"A composer's soul is much more than their physical presence or lifetime," Ott concludes. "It lives on in every work they have created, and comes alive again each time someone picks it up somewhere in the world." In *Piano Works*, she provides conclusive evidence of the heart still beating within Jóhannsson's music, whatever shape it takes. Exposed without strings, stripped of voices, devoid of drones, unplugged from the grid, she vindicates his keen emotional language and confirms his thirst for reinvention. One might even say it's like knowing him ...

WYNDHAM WALLACE
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Music composed by Jóhann Jóhannsson
"Be Over" (from Shadow Play) and "Beauty" (from Blind Massage)
composed by Jóhann Jóhannsson & Jonas Colstrup.

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Piano Technician: Sigurður Kristinsson
Executive Producer: Anusch Alimirzaie
Product Manager: Leonie Petersen
Project Coordination Manager: Ky Xa Nguyen
A&R Coordination Managers: Nicole Maurer, Alice Castant
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